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COMMITTEE ON THE ELIMINATION OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN

Fifteenth session

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 288th MEETING

Held at Headquarters, New York,
on Tuesday, 16 January 1996, at 4 p.m.

Chairperson: Ms. CORTI

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The meeting was called to order at 4.10 p.m.

IMPLEMENTATION OF ARTICLE 21 OF THE CONVENTION ON THE ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN (continued)

1. At the invitation of the Chairperson, Dr. Sadik (United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)) took a place at the Committee table.

2. Dr. SADIK (Executive Director, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)) said that the elimination of discrimination against women had been the focus of several recent conferences. After reviewing those conferences, she said that both the Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women and the Programme of Action adopted at the International Conference on Population and Development encompassed an agenda of concrete economic, social, health and related issues to meet the needs and to improve the lives of individual men and women. Underlying each action was an ethical framework based on human rights considerations. That emphasis on human rights - including women's rights to equality with men - provided a compelling justification for recommended actions.

3. The human rights approach to women's health implied that international and national policies must be based on recognition of women's rights, including the right to reproductive and sexual health and family planning, and demanded full commitment to the removal of economic, social and legal disadvantages that denied women their right to health. It demanded that men and women should participate as equals at all levels of policy-making and implementation, strove to eliminate poverty and social exclusion and called for education, training and public information to strengthen world-wide commitment to human rights.

4. Human rights, and specifically women's rights, were fundamental to the work of UNFPA. A commitment to gender equality and equity and the empowerment of women underlay new UNFPA policy guidelines for supporting action programmes and advocacy activities in the area of gender, population and development, and she hoped for collaboration with the Committee in those areas. UNFPA was collaborating with the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) on issues related to human rights and reproductive rights and with the World Health Organization (WHO) on adolescent reproductive health. It also planned to collaborate with the Centre for Reproductive Law and Policy to develop regional reports on legal barriers and policy structures affecting women's reproductive lives. UNFPA would work with other United Nations agencies to sensitize women's non-governmental organizations, as well as human rights advocates, in order that they could monitor the implementation of the Convention at country level. It would also work with Governments to ensure universal ratification of the Convention by the year 2000.

5. She looked forward to further discussion on how the international community could serve the needs of women better. Respect for women's rights as human rights would require stronger and more consistent support for the full integration of women in all stages of the development process, for equal opportunity for girls and women in education and job training, for services that met women's health needs throughout their lives and for the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against women.

6. Ms. SHALEV said that the Cairo and Beijing Conferences had changed attitudes to women's health, particularly their sexual and reproductive health. It was important to build upon those changes and further elaborate the guarantees contained in the Convention.

7. Dr. SADIK (Executive Director, United Nations Population Fund) said that a way must be found to make certain practices socially unacceptable and bring about change. Local groups would have to break taboos and speak out on matters which deserved aggressive condemnation.

8. Ms. OUEDRAOGO said that UNFPA had improved its approach to women, particularly with regard to training and educational assistance to individuals, and Burkina Faso had benefited.

9. Ms. AOUIJ said that Tunisia had received a great deal of assistance from UNFPA, enabling it to have a modern demographic policy. Women must be made aware of the importance of health as a woman's right. A modern and developing interpretation of article 12 of the Convention was necessary: that article was particularly relevant to the current revolution in attitudes.

10. Ms. BUSTELO GARCIA DEL REAL welcomed the commitment of UNFPA to increase awareness of the Convention and work for its full ratification. She requested that UNFPA should disseminate the Committee's recommendations on all aspects of reproductive health, adding that a general recommendation on article 12 was necessary.

11. Ms. ABAKA said that the new UNFPA approach to family planning, involving men, was welcome, as was its emphasis on the empowerment of women. Article 12 must be implemented, and it should be possible to use local experts from the Committee to help implement policies in specific countries.

12. Ms. AYKOR said that women's health was related to their status. In Turkey, the Ministry of Health was working with UNFPA on a new project which recognized that reproductive rights were one of the key issues that would raise women's status.

13. Ms. ESTRADA CASTILLO said that women's health must be recognized as a human right. UNFPA should launch an information campaign targeting rural women to assure them that their health and reproductive rights were guaranteed. There was a need for positive action which took into account the fact that the desires of the people and the Government did not always coincide.

14. Ms. GARCIA-PRINCE said that the UNFPA representatives in Latin America had an important role as an advocate of women's issues, but that there were often difficulties in making contact with Governments and raising awareness of demographic policies. Moreover, the opposition of the religious establishment to family planning created further difficulties. The World Bank, an important potential source of support, seemed to have reached no consensus which would permit the development of programmes and allow UNFPA to carry out its plans.

15. Dr. SADIK said she would ask the various geographical divisions of UNFPA to contact members of the Committee.

The meeting rose at 4:50 p.m.